

Testimony of Michael A. Darnell  
California Policy Director  
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on  
Farmland Preservation as Part of the California Ag Vision  
Tulare, California, July 2, 2008

Hi, my name is Mike Darnell, California Policy Director of American Farmland Trust. AFT is a national non-profit organization working to conserve and protect the best farmland, and help agriculture make a positive contribution to environmental quality.

We applaud the Board of Food & Agriculture and CDFA for undertaking this landmark visioning process. We hope and trust that it will lead to measurable objectives, a specific action agenda, and the assignment of responsibilities to both public and private sector institutions for achieving the desired outcomes.

Today, I want to focus on one thing that the vision should incorporate: the preservation of California's irreplaceable farmland, especially here in the Central Valley, which accounts for more than half the state's total agricultural output. There is nothing more fundamental to the sustainability of California agriculture than the actual land itself. It is impossible to envision a bright future for California agriculture without adequate farmland.

I grew up in Northern San Joaquin County, and have personally seen the effects of growth on farmland in the Central Valley. As I was growing up, the area surrounding my home was comprised of orchards, dairies, alfalfa fields and other seasonal crops. Now, most of this formerly prime farmland has been reduced to 5-10 acre ranchettes. The land around the home I grew up in now features large lot residential homes and small agricultural fields full of weeds and pests.

Housing developments, commercial sprawl and rural ranchettes are steadily and incrementally eating away at the Valley's agricultural base. Recent AFT studies<sup>1</sup> have documented the cumulative impact: In the Valley's leading

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<sup>1</sup> *The Future Is Now: Central Valley Farmland at the Tipping Point* (2006); *Paving Paradise: A New Perspective on California Farmland Conversion* (2007). Both available at [www.farmland.org/california](http://www.farmland.org/california).

agricultural counties, more than 70 percent of the land being developed is prime, unique or of statewide importance. Development is consuming this highly productive land in a very inefficient manner, accommodating only 8 people for every acre it consumes. In addition to the loss of land, there is increasing conflict between agriculture and urban development, including land price inflation, competition for water and more demands for regulation of agricultural practices. We cannot continue to tolerate this inefficient use of farmland, and still expect agriculture to remain economically healthy.

Instead, a statewide vision and plan for agriculture must help assure that the best farmland remains available for agriculture, and that urban development doesn't convert any more land than is truly necessary to accommodate our expanding population and the continued economic growth we all desire. This endeavor will not only maximize the options for California agricultural producers and the industry as a whole, but will promote more efficient development to help achieve the state's climate goals, improve environmental quality and contribute to the fiscal viability of cities, counties and the state by minimizing public service costs.

**American Farmland Trust, therefore, proposes that the California Ag Vision include a quantifiable goal of reducing the conversion of prime, unique and statewide important farmland to an average of not more than one acre for every 20 new residents in every county that has significant agricultural production. By 2030, this would save over 500,000 acres of land statewide, compared with a continuation of the current trend.**

Ideally, I would now like to elaborate on the kinds of specific actions and responsibilities that could be adopted to implement this goal. However, due to time constraints, let it suffice to say that AFT has given this vision a great deal of thought and will provide further ideas for consideration as the process goes forward.

Thank you for your attention and your commitment to a bright future for California agriculture.